DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 150 636 CS 203 964

AUTHOR Hist, J.S.
TITLE Popularity in Wonderland.
PUB DATE Oct 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association in the South (6th, Jacksonville, Florida, October 6-8, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Awards; *Childhood Interests; *Childrens Books; *Childrens Literature; *Evaluation Criteria; Literary Criticism; Literature Appreciation; Professional Recognition; *Reading Interests; Standards

ABSTRACT

Specialists in the field of children's literature, who publish research and decide on awards for individual books, should give serious study to what children themselves choose to read. Among the children's books that were not originally awarded top honors by critics but that have proved extremely popular with children are the Oz books by L. Frank Baum, "Charlotte's Web" by E.B. White, and the Henry Huggins Books written by Beverly Cleary. Donald J. Sobol's books about Encyclopedia Brown, a boy detective, are bestsellers that have also received acceptance by critics; one of the world's all-time bestsellers is the series about Tintin, also a boy detective, that was created by the Belgian cartoonist Herge (Georges Remi). Childhood's heroes are important, and no study of children's literature is adequate that focuses on the prestigious to the exclusion of the popular. (GW)

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J. S. Nist

POPULARITY IN WONDERLAND

Aubrey Menen satirically stated that

> My schoolmasters, my professors, my cultivated friends and my literary acquaintances who had so impressed upon me the richness and magnificence of English literature were all charlatans. They hadn't read it. I was a charlatan myself . . . . We had not read the English literature that we talked about because, as I discovered [later, reading it] day after weary day, the greater part of Eng. Lit. . . . is unreadable."[1]

Leaving Menen to his tongue-in-cheek among the masterpieces, I propose that a somewhat related iconoclastic thought would stimulate studies in the field of children's literature: viz, that the specialists who congregate at meetings, publish research, and decide on Awards--while they have indeed themselves read honored children's works--need to check to see if children read these books; and the scholars should give serious study to what children do choose to read.

Some obvious cases of popularity which have provoked scholarly reassessment to varying degrees are L. Frank Baum, E. B. White, and Beverly Cleary. The wizard who created Oz flunked at almost everything else, from Shakespeare to the Aberdeen [South Dakota] Saturday Pioneer. But from a file drawer label (O-Z), he created a bit of immortality.

Many publishers refused Baum's book, which they judged a radical--and therefore unsellable--departure from the accepted children's-story pattern. Such refusal, unfortunately, is a common ailment: among others, Beatrix Potter and Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr. Seuss) also

suffered from it. As events have proved, of course, fairy-tale justice has prevailed in such cases, and the publishers are left bereft of profits, lamenting like shortsighted ogres.

Meanwhile, back at the bookshops, "The Oz books continue to outsell almost all other juveniles."[2] In addition, a cult has arisen, which conducts its own gatherings (the Munchkins Convention, the National Convention of Ozmopolitans, the Winkie Convention), circulates its own periodicals (the Baum Bugle, Oziana) and bestows its own honors (the L. Frank Baum Memorial Award, the Oz Research Prize).

This adult enthusiasm is no mere intrusion into the world of childhood, but rather it is an affirmation of magical times too enjoyable to grow out of simply because one has grown up. Disney made a fortune by capitalizing on this phenomenon. Only the psychologically naive think that the California and Florida Fantasia-Land and -World--along with all the intercoastal imitations they have spawned--are for children. The proprietors are wise enough to advertise them as "family" fare, and woe and displacement await the little tyke seeking to have his photo taken with Mickey amid the adults.

The plainest statement of the shared imaginative world of children and adults was made by C. S. Lewis: "no book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty . . ."[3] Lewis himself was one of the most versatile of interage writers, equally literate in Narnia or contra Screwtape.

To return to the yellow brick road: the audiovisual version annually brings us Dorothy/Judy in television's most frequently rerun

movie. Popular acclaim has even finally won mention for the wonderful wizard by historical and critical authorities, albeit grudgingly made under the heading of "Books That Stir Controversy."[4] The controversy is among specialists; among the public, Baum's American-Romantic tale is simply unabashedly enjoyed.

Perhaps Dorothy has been "snobbed" by comparison with the most marvelous of literary-tale heroines: Alice. Such comparison seems as unproductive as pairing Gone With the Wind and War and Peace.

Carroll's work is a masterpiece of the intellect, though cloaked as nonsense--that creative perversion of logic, never to be defined as no-sense. The mathematician-photographer-drug experimenter don was inspired by little Alice Liddell, but his intent was to exercise wit and style far beyond a seven-year-old's level. Compounded with our century-remove from the Victorian Era and cultural distance from England, the Alice books have become classics of the adult world, an inversion of the process by which Gulliver and Crusoe became nursery heroes.

Baum also first created his tale for an immediate audience: his four sons. As the story shaped its way onto bits of scrap paper, its author made an honest self-assessment:

> When I was young I longed to write a great novel that should win me fame. Now that I am getting old my first book is written to amuse children. For, aside from my evident inability to do anything "great," I have learned that to please a child is a sweet and lovely thing that warms one's heart.[5]

If a brainless hayseed, a rusty mechanical man and a nonferocious feline seem an unlikely combination, so do a pig, a spider, and a pubescent girl. E. B. White was renowned for his New Yorker essays

when he published Charlotte's Web. The Newbery judges, noting his literary stature, gave the book runner-up honor. The children gave it their love.

By 1970, this love for Charlotte A. Cavatica and Wilbur insured that White was presented the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, which is given at five-year intervals for a writer's total contribution to American children's literature. For White, this was only two books, to which he then added a third.

The Award first went to Mrs. Wilder herself, who also, though always runner-up'd but never Newbery Medaled, was immensely popular with readers. The Little House series continues to be a favorite in its television translation and elaboration. Because the Wilder Award allows time for perspective in assessments, it tends to satisfy both literary critics and the reading public.

A third writer whose popularity has helped her weather the vagaries of scholarly judgments is the most recent Wilder Awardee: Beverly Cleary. Her Henry Huggins has been the paperback pal of two generations. His hilarious attempt to wrap Ribsy for bus transport is fitting prerequisite for the child who will, a year or two later, laugh at Tom dosing the cat with Painkiller.

Cleary's writings focus on the everyday foibles of middleclass youngsters. During the recent spate of multiethnic books, her stories fell into disfavor with some. One anthologist even anti-WASPishly cited Cleary as an example of poor quality children's material.[6] Such negative didacticism fortunately has disappeared in Cleary's case, as

eager readers from all backgrounds continue to devour the adventures of Henry and Ellen Tebbits and Ramona the Pest.

Cleary, White and Baum have each sold hundreds of thousands of copies of their works. Other children's writers whose literary abilities have been recognized by adult authorities have also earned a youthful following with accompanying high sales: for example, Marguerite Henry, Scott O'Dell, and Syd Hoff.

But a statistical survey of Best-Selling Children's Books[7] indicates that the top juvenile-sales multi-millionaire is a junior Hercule Poirot: Encyclopedia Brown, the detecting offspring of Donald J. Sobol. Somewhat surprising is the nod given Encyclopedia by the same authorities who find Oz "controversial": "humor and suspense are combined" in the "lively adventures" of an "astute ten-year-old."[8] Perhaps this approval reflects an Iagoan answer to Juliet's "What's in a name?": a reference work is to be preferred to a filing cabinet.

Sobol's critical acceptability is enhanced by his nonEncyclopedian works. But his boy Brown owes his huge popularity and sales-appeal to more than effective mass-merchandising.

One reason is the appeal of a mystery to natural human curiosity. The genre, with its lineage of Poe as parent and Doyle as godfather, has never been beyond the pale of respectability. Since even academics profess a weakness for Sayers and Christie, children enjoy a similar mystery-solving indulgence.

Another reason for children's enjoyment of the Encyclopedia Brown books is the brevity of the cases. Youngsters' attention span

is notoriously short, and even low-skilled readers can have the satisfaction of completing a case.

Successful entertainment is always paced to audience timing. On the teenage level, this has been recognized by writers in the genre of the adolescent novel. I term the quality mediagenic: brief enough (usually about a 150-page-thin paperback) to compete with the siren tube and/or translatable into audiovisual format for television or movie presentation (for example, Sounder, Walkabout, Where the Lilies Bloom).

Back to boy detectives. Among their number is a young fellow of conveniently indeterminate age who is probably one of the world's all-time bestsellers--at least since 1929. I was introduced to him, appropriately, by one of my sons. Though Tintin is published in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Iceland, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, and Sweden, only recently (1974) have his adventures become available to readers in the United States.

His lengthy exclusion may have been partly because of a lack of American affiliation by the British publishers (Methuen) who control the English translation. Although Tintin is cosmopolitan and quite impartial in his exotic settings--from Afghar to Syldavia--he is the creation of a Belgian: cartoonist Hergé (Georges Rémi).

Hergé's work, combined with his popular ubiquity, has earned him place in serious studies of children's artists.[9] The Tintin books are published in comic-strip format, varying in sizes of individual scenes

and including full- and half-page frames. (Award winners Raymond Briggs in Britain and Maurice Sendak in the United States, among others, have used similar forms.)

There is action aplenty, yet a minimum of murderous violence. Slapstick humor abounds, with all-too-fallible adult companions foils for the capable Tintin. Simply stated, Hergé has created a modern worldwide chapbook hero.

And childhood's heroes are important. As the secretary of the International Research Society for Children's Literature, Mary Ørvig of Sweden, has noted,[10] no serious cultural study can ignore children's literature, since we all spend one-quarter of our lives being children and growing up. A corollary statement, which the present essay on "Popularity in Wonderland" has touched upon, is that no study of children's literature is adequate which focuses on the prestigious to the exclusion of the popular.

Joan Stidham Nist
Department of Educational Media
Auburn University
Auburn, Alabama 36830

Notes

[1]Aubrey Menen, "The Myth of English Literature," from Party of Twenty (1963) in Person, Place, and Point of View (Scott, Foresman, 1974), p. 301.

[2]Daniel P. Mannix, "The Father of the Wizard of Oz," American Heritage, 16 (Dec. 1964), 109. Mannix's article is condensed as "The Wizard Who Created Oz," in The Reader's Digest (June, 1966), 104-108.

[3]C. S. Lewis, "On Stories," in Essays Presented to Charles Williams (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 100.

[4]Zena Sutherland and May Hill Arbuthnot, Children and Books (Scott, Foresman, 1977; 5th ed.), p. 233.

[5]Letter to his sister by Lyman Frank Baum, quoted by Mannix, p. 36.

[6]Mary Ann Nelson, A Comparative Anthology of Children's Literature (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 467-468.

[7]By Jean Spealman Kujoth (Scarecrow, 1973).

[8]Sutherland and Arbuthnot (1972; 4th ed.), pp. 14, 21, 474; (1977; 5th ed.), pp. 13, 347.

[9]William Feaver, When We Were Young: Two Centuries of Children's Book Illustration (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), pp. 22, 95, plate 89; John Rodenbeck, "The Tin-Tin Series: Children's Literature and Popular Appeal," Children's Literature 1 (1972), 93-97.

[10]Mary Ørvig, "Children's Books in Translation: Facts and Beliefs," in Issues in Children's Book Selection (Bowker, 1973), p. 189.